

History is or ought to be a collaborative enterprise, one in which the researcher, the archivist, the curator and the teacher, the 'do-it-yourself' enthusiast and the local historian, the family history societies and the individual archaeologist, should all be regarded as equally engaged.  
Raphael Samuel

# COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH: HISTORY FROM BELOW

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# COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH: HISTORY FROM BELOW

Kevin Myers and Ian Grosvenor



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# CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

## Foundation Series

Today we are increasingly seeing calls for universities to collaborate with communities in designing and conducting research. While such calls are to be welcomed they tend to suffer from a historical blind-spot that ignores the fact that research collaboration – partnerships, participation (call it what you will) – is a deep and powerful research tradition that dates back beyond the recent emergence of calls for ‘co-produced’ knowledge.

This series of reviews developed as part of the AHRC’s Connected Communities Programme, sets out to make visible some of these traditions of collaborative research. In doing so, the series aims to:

- help those who are new to the field to understand the huge wealth of history and resources that they might draw upon when beginning their own research collaborations;
- help those who seek to fund and promote collaborative research to understand the philosophical and political underpinnings of different traditions; and
- support those working in these traditions to identify points of commonality and difference in their methods and philosophies as a basis for strengthening the practice of collaborative research as a whole.

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The eight reviews in the series were developed to provide eight very different ‘takes’ on the histories of collaborative research practices in the arts, humanities and social sciences. They do not pretend to be exhaustive, but to provide a personal perspective from the authors on the traditions that they are working within. As we worked together as a group to develop these, however, a number of commonalities emerged:

1. A critique of the mission-creep of scientific knowledge practices into the social sciences and humanities, and of the claims to produce universally valid forms of knowledge from specific limited institutional, cultural and social positions.
2. A commitment to creating research practices that enable diverse experiences of life and diverse knowledge traditions to be voiced and heard.
3. A resistance to seeing research methods as simply a technocratic matter; recognising instead that choices about how, where and with whom knowledge is created presuppose particular theories of reality, of power and of knowledge.
4. A commitment to grapple with questions of power, expertise and quality and to resist the idea that ‘anything goes’ in collaborative research and practice. There are better and worse ways of developing participation in research practice, there are conditions and constraints that make collaboration at times unethical.

At the same time, a set of names and events recur throughout the reviews: John Dewey, Paolo Freire, Raymond Williams, Donna Haraway appear as theorists and practitioners who provide powerful philosophical resources for thinking with. Critical incidents and moments reappear across the reviews: the rise of anti-colonial movements in the 1950s and 1960s, of second wave feminism and critical race theory in the 1960s and 1970s; of disability rights movements in the 1970s and 1980s; of post-human and ecological analyses in the 1990s and 2000s. Read as a whole, these reviews demonstrate the intellectual coherence and vibrancy of these many-threaded and interwoven histories of engaged scholarship and scholarly social action.

The first of the reviews, by Kevin Myers and Ian Grosvenor, discusses the long tradition of ‘history from below’ as a collaborative enterprise between researchers, archivists, curators, teachers, enthusiasts, local historians, archaeologists and researchers. They discuss the emergence of the ‘professional historian’ alongside the rise of the nation state, and the way in which this idea was challenged and deepened by the emergence of activist histories in the mid-20th century. They investigate the precedents set by the rise of groups such as the History Workshop movement and trace their legacies through a set of case studies that explore feminist histories of Birmingham, disabled people’s histories of the First World War and the critique of white histories of conflict emerging from the work of black historians and communities.

Two of the reviews explore currents within participatory and critical research traditions. Niamh Moore explores these traditions through the lens of feminist philosophies and methodologies, while Tom Wakeford and Javier Sanchez Rodriguez explore the history of participatory action research (PAR) and its ties to social movements outside the academy.

**Niamh Moore's** review highlights the strategic contributions made to participatory research through the traditions of feminist and indigenous methodologies. Drawing on Donna Haraway's metaphor of the cat's cradle, Moore explores the way that these different traditions have learned from each other, fed into each other and been in (productive) tensions over the years. Importantly, she makes visible the common threads of these traditions, including a concern with questions of power, matters of voice, agency and empowerment and reflexivity. She identifies examples that include: popular epidemiology and women's health; the controversies and emerging insights arising from the publication of the book 'I Rigoberta Menchú' (a collaboration between Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan activist and Peace Prize winner and anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray); and the online Mukurtu platform for sharing and curating community stories.

**Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez's** review is written from the position of individuals who situate themselves as both activists and academics. From a perspective both inside and outside the academy, they make visible the traditions of participatory action research that have evolved in social movements and their interaction with academic knowledge. They explain how PAR emerged as a practice that seeks to intervene and act on the world through disrupting assumptions about who has knowledge, and by building intercultural dialogue between those whose interests have historically been marginalised and those experts and institutions in dominant positions. They discuss the contributions of Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, as well as the emergence within universities of centres for Action Research and indigenist approaches to research before exploring recent examples of PAR from the Highlander Folk School in the US, to the Cumbrian Hill Farmers post Chernobyl, to questions of Food Sovereignty in India (amongst others).

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Central to many attempts to build collaborative research practices is a turn towards the arts and arts methodologies as a means of engaging with different forms of knowledge. Such a turn, however, can often overlook the distinctive and sustained tradition within contemporary arts of reflecting upon the question of how publics can come to participate in arts practices. Our series therefore includes two reflections on this question from different perspectives:

First, **Anne Douglas'** review offers a 'poetics of participation in contemporary arts', locating the turn to participation in contemporary arts within a wider history of 20th and 21st century arts and politics. She highlights the huge range of work by artists and arts co-operatives who are seeking to make work through participatory forms, and the deep scholarly tensions and debates that surround these practices. She explores through this rich history the debates over whether participation has become instrumentalised; whether the art/life divide should be preserved or eroded; the links between participatory aesthetics and cybernetic ethics; and the capacity for participation to challenge alienation and neoliberalism. Recognising arts practice as itself a form of research and inquiry into the world, she concludes with a set of powerful reflections on the role of the freedom to improvise and the importance of participation as a moment of care for and empathy with the other.

Second, **Steve Pool**, community artist and academic, reflects on the related but different traditions of community arts as they might relate to social science research. He considers what researchers in the social sciences might need to know and understand about artistic traditions if they desire to mobilise arts practice within the social sciences. He discusses the increasing democratisation of tools for making, the potential for them to open up artistic practice to publics as well as the importance of recognising that such practices are part of wider traditions and philosophies about the value and purpose of art. In particular, he discusses the tension between the idea of artistic autonomy – art for art's sake – and artistic democracy – the democratic creativity of all individuals. He foregrounds the way in which the community arts movement was also allied to a wider politics that moved towards cultural democracy and explores the contemporary practice of artists working in and with social science through examples such as Nicola Atkinson's 'Odd Numbers' and the Community Arts Zone's 'Being Cindy Sherman'.

More recent traditions of collaborative research characterise our final three reviews which take on, respectively, the way that design theory and practice are playing an important role in reshaping society, products and services; the emergence of new technologies to facilitate new forms of collaboration; and the increasingly urgent injunction to develop research approaches that enable collaboration with the 'more-than-human' others with whom we share the planet.

**Theodore Zamenopoulos** and **Katerina Alexiou** discuss the field of co-design and its underpinning theories and methods. They argue that Design as a process is always concerned with addressing a challenge or opportunity to create a better future reality, and explore how co-design has evolved as a process of ensuring that those with the life experiences, expertise and knowledge are actively involved in these making new tools, products and services. They observe how the participatory turn in this field has been concerned with both changing the objects of design – whether this is services or objects – *and* with the changing processes of designing itself. They highlight four major traditions and their distinctive approaches, before exploring the politics and practices of co-design through case studies of work.

**Chiara Bonacchi** explores how the internet is enabling new forms of collaborative knowledge production at a massive scale. She locates this discussion in the traditions of citizen science and public humanities, and examines how these have been reshaped through the development of hacker communities, open innovation and crowd-sourcing. In this process, she discusses the new exclusions and opportunities that are emerging through the development of projects that mobilise mass contribution. She examines the cases of MicroPasts and TrowelBlazers that demonstrate how these methods are being used in the humanities. In particular, she explores the ethical questions that emerge in these online collaborative spaces and the need for a values-based approach to their design.

**Tehseen Noorani** and **Julian Brigstocke** conclude the series with an exploration of the practice and philosophy of ‘more-than-human research’ which seeks to build collaborative research with non-human/ more-than-human others. They discuss its philosophical foundations in pragmatism, ecofeminism and indigenous knowledge traditions and identify some of the theoretical and practical challenges that are raised when researchers from humanist traditions begin to explore how to ‘give voice’ to non-human others. In the review, they consider how researchers might expand their ‘repertoires of listening’ and address the ethical challenges of such research. To ground their analysis, they discuss the work of the Listening to Voices Project as well as accounts of researcher-animal partnerships and projects that draw on Mayan cosmology as a means of working with sustainable forestry in Guatemala.

This collection of reviews is far from exhaustive. There are other histories of collaborative research that are under-written here – there is much more to be said (as we discuss elsewhere) on the relationship between race and the academic production of knowledge. Each of these accounts is also personal, navigating a distinctive voiced route through the particular history they are narrating.

Despite this, at a time when politics is polarising into a binary choice between ‘expert knowledge’ and ‘populism’, these reviews show, collectively, that another way is possible. They demonstrate that sustained collaborative research partnerships between publics, community researchers, civil society, universities and artists are not only possible, but that they can and do produce knowledge, experiences and insights that are both intellectually robust and socially powerful.

**Professor Keri Facer**  
**Dr Katherine Dunleavy**  
Joint Editors: Connected Communities Foundation Series

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Ian Grosvenor is professor of Urban Educational History at the University of Birmingham, England and has responsibility for City and Cultural Liaison. He has worked extensively with AHRC having served on the Connected Communities Advisory Group, the Care for the Future Steering Group and the Common Cause Working Group. He is currently Director of the AHRC funded Voices of War and Peace Legacy of the First World War Engagement Centre and Chair of Birmingham Museums Trust.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

**‘History from below’ is an umbrella term. It describes a tradition of work in which ordinary people constructed, narrated and distributed their histories. Quite who constituted these people and the form and content of the histories they produced has always been widely variable. ‘History from below’ is a term that can include working class autobiography, collaborative histories of peoples, places and spaces and a whole range of commemorative activities designed to remember individuals, events or processes in the past.**

History from below is characteristically an organic and democratic form of knowledge. Its **sources** include any tangible and intangible materials that carry traces of the past and include memories and dreams, documents and photographs, performances and places. The **preservation** and **interpretation** of these sources is a collaborative exercise, undertaken by groups and collectives, who care for these sources in archives and use them as the basis for new histories. In doing so, members of the groups become **historians** – sometimes they are designated community, public or citizen historians – who promote new **perspectives** on the past.

This review approaches history from below as a type of collaborative research. It aims to identify the origins of history from below; to identify and explain its key concepts; to describe and explain its methodology; and, finally, to evaluate contemporary debates and future significance of its distinctive approach to historical research and knowledge.

## 1.1 What is history from below?

History from below is an umbrella term, used to refer to a wide range of activities and practices dedicated to remembering some aspect of the past and making it relevant for the present. It is associated especially with enlarging and democratising the subject matter of history, with collecting new **sources** and materials and has often been implicitly or explicitly set up in opposition to professional, official or otherwise authorised versions of the past.

History from below is always also, therefore, inflected by politics and is in some sense ideological. The very phrase alludes to the ways in which marginalised sections of the population imagine, use and/or understand the past. For the radical political left its starting point was the conviction that modern societies were stratified by forms of exploitation that could be opaque but also profoundly alienating. The purpose of history from below, in this tradition, was for working class people to research and understand their own history and locality. In doing so, they were assumed to develop cognitive skills, affective states and political positions that might improve their lives both individually and collectively.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Samuel 1981.

From this perspective, history from below has always been part of an attempt to democratise both historical research and historical knowledge. It was underpinned by a sense that individuals and groups were capable of developing a critical historical consciousness that would underpin social solidarities in the present. By way of comparison, a conservative history from below eschews politics and downplays social divisions and struggles. Instead, its major themes are likely to be around values and the social institutions, especially religious and familial, that sustain them. Social relationships are pictured as reciprocal rather than exploitative and as the basis for harmonious and organic communities.<sup>2</sup>

There is no single version of ‘history from below’, therefore, or a correct way to practice it. It is a tradition that flourishes because the past, as subjective experiences, individual and collective memories or more formal narratives, frame processes of subjectivity and identification. They form a part of who we are and it is precisely this power, one that bridges agents to social structures and stitches individuals into communities, that explains the continuing importance of ‘history from below’. Its importance, and its allure, is in the claim that in changing the histories we tell we may also be able to create new configurations of community.

## 1.2 The purpose and scope of this review

History from below is a term, and set of practices, open to interpretation. What follows is our interpretation of those practices; it is one that seeks to identify the **ideological** and **epistemological** basis of history from below. There is, we argue, a distinctive politics of knowledge that has characterised work in this tradition and it has been expressed in a distinctive set of **methodological** approaches that we also seek to identify.

- Section 2 sets out some historical origins, and different types, of history from below.
- Section 3 identifies and explains some key dimensions of history from below as a research activity.
- Section 4 presents some examples of history from below.
- Section 5 offers some conclusions and discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Laslett 1965.

There is no single version of history from below or a correct way to practice it. Its importance is in the claim that in changing the histories we tell we may also be able to create new configurations of community.

## 2. HISTORY FROM BELOW: HISTORICAL ORIGINS

If ‘history from below’ is a tradition that encompasses many practices, those practices do have some common origins. Those origins can be found in the long transition from premodern to modern societies that occurred roughly between the 16th and 19th centuries in Europe. That transition entailed a shift from stable, rural and organic societies to dynamic and urban ones in which the power of convention gradually declined. Secular modes of thinking and print technology together helped to distribute new ideas and underpinned new socio-cultural groupings. The long-term result was a new kind of modern individual, less bound by divine accounts of life and death or by routine habit, and with a growing sense of individual autonomy and identity.<sup>3</sup>

Many historians and sociologists think that these modern individuals developed distinctively modern attitudes towards history.<sup>4</sup> Instead of seeing history as providing examples to follow or persons to imitate, the past was increasingly imagined as a starting point, a distant origin, from which individuals, their families, communities and nations progressed. In the modernist thought that was increasingly influential after about 1750 humans, like nations, developed over time. If this new orientation towards the future reflected experiences of rapid economic, political and social change across the globe, it also stimulated new attitudes towards, and concerns about, the past. The result was a new interest in history and new practices, running from elite to popular culture, in which individuals, groups and nations set out about preserving, protecting, remembering and celebrating elements of the past.<sup>5</sup>

These modern practices of history, the ‘ensemble of activities and practices in which ideas of history were embedded’ or ‘past-present relations rehearsed’ were extremely diverse.<sup>6</sup> This diversity makes them difficult to either summarise or categorise but, for present purposes, three types of modern historical practice can be distinguished; the affective, disciplined and activist. These ‘types’ of history from below are offered here simply for explanatory purposes. Although these histories do have distinctive qualities the boundaries between them are flexible and porous.

3 Bayly 2004.

4 See, for example, Giddens 1991; Macfarlane 2000; Therborn 2003; Burke 2002.

5 Giddens 2002; Therborn 2003; Fritzsche 2004.

6 Samuel 1994: 8.

7 Crane 2000.

8 Sweet 2004; Crane 2000.

9 Beckett 2011: 118.

10 Sweet 2001: 191.

11 Sweet 2001: 191.

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### 2.1 Affective history

From roughly the late 18th century onwards the past seems to have increasingly become a source of popular pleasure, and a site of emotional satisfaction, for both individuals and groups. People across all social groups, and men, women and children appeared to invest time and money collecting and preserving objects that quickly gained the status of historical artefacts. Such objects included collections of coins, medals, documents and paintings. Before the late 18th century these activities certainly took place but they were largely elite activities and often explicitly attached to scholarly programmes of research. By the turn of the 19th century they had become much more popular activities and were augmented by, for example, the preservation of familial letters and heirlooms, reading historical fiction and growing interest in ruins, monuments and historical architecture.<sup>7</sup>

**Antiquaries**, usually gentlemanly enthusiasts who dug, mapped and collected the artefacts of the past, helped to define, preserve and popularise modern conceptions of the past. ‘Fired by their love for the past’ and motivated by a desire to establish the specifically historical credentials of local families, parishes, towns and counties, they formed local history societies, enabled early forms of historical tourism, discussed methods and published extensive histories.<sup>8</sup> One of the largest undertakings of this kind, typical in its style and interests, was John Nichols’ *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, published as eight folio books, between 1795 and 1815 and written by a team of more than one hundred researchers and authors.<sup>9</sup> These urban and county histories, the product of vast amounts of collaborative research and labour accumulated over time, were, moreover, ‘only the tip of the iceberg of antiquarian endeavour’.<sup>10</sup> Unpublished histories, but also collections of documents, maps, images and curiosities, that were compiled around Britain at this time mean that, as Rosemary Sweet has argued, ‘a simple checklist of published works offers only a very poor indication of the extent of antiquarian endeavour and interest in the country at large’.<sup>11</sup>



All this was suggestive of a new, or at least a modified, form of cognition in which a sense of the historical, of the distance and difference between past and present, became a central feature of modern identity. Modern individuals had memories that came to be understood as constituting a key part of the psychology, or the interiority, of people. These memories often concerned the immediate and small scale – family and households, neighbourhoods and landscapes – and they were recalled, reconstructed and understood through a whole range of practices and media.<sup>12</sup> The amateur status and affective tone of these historical practices meant that they were open to, and influenced by, marginalised populations. Women, for example, were important actors in practices that included, but were not limited to, performing historical plays, singing historical ballads, collecting objects, visiting monuments, reading historical romances.<sup>13</sup> They underpinned the formation and production of local and vernacular identities, strongly rooted in place and organised around enduring social hierarchies of skill, gender, status, religion and ethnicity.<sup>14</sup>

Affective histories were, then, characteristically small scale. They were concerned with the domestic and the local and with the intimate and familiar. They were also, as the term suggests, connected with emotions. Just as antiquaries ‘loved’ the past, later generations of amateur historians and educators would explain their enthusiasm for the past as a passion. It is a passion that has both sustained old forms of popular historical practice and stimulated new ones. The elite genealogies and local histories researched in the 18th century appear, for example, to have been democratised as a result of the exponential growth of family history in the period since the 1960s. Millions of amateur historians are now committed to tracing ancestral genealogies by the patient and painstaking scouring of parish registers, census records and local newspapers.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Smith 1998.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, McKibbin 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Rogers and Smith 1993.

<sup>16</sup> McCalman and Picker 2010: 6; de Groot 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Rasmussen 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Myers and Hamilton 2015; Korte and Paletschek 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Winter 1995; Schweitzer 2013.

Similarly, contemporary historical re-enactment culture, not least in the form of reality television, has antecedents at least as far back as the 18th century where war gaming was motivated not only by the desire to learn about the past but to ‘experience history somatically and emotionally – to know what it felt like’.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, new forms of historical practice have emerged. These practices are often connected with changing ideas about, and relationships to, historical sources and to new technologies of reproduction and communication but they are motivated by, and experienced in, more or less explicitly emotional terms. Two contrasting examples serve to illustrate the point.

The first example relates to the increasing access to welfare records by people formerly in state or charitable care to recreate their biographies, to trace families and to create coherent identities. In the case of the Danish Welfare Museum, this has resulted in a curatorial practice that not only informs care leavers about the existence of records and right of access but a method of working through the sources collaboratively in a manner which actively seeks to create space for silenced voices. This practice requires recognising that engagement with the archives can be a deeply emotional experience and that coming to terms with, and responding to, the historical record a process with emancipatory potential.<sup>17</sup>

The second example of new forms of historical practice is the genre of social media history. User participation not only encourages multiple voices and problematizes sole authorship but the very fragmentary aesthetic of social media disrupts linear chronologies and arguments and, as a result, has been claimed not only as a democratising force for history but also for a distinctive, accumulated and sedimented form of historical knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Affective histories are not, therefore, only distinguished by their scale or by their embrace of emotion. Instead, popular forms of researching and representing the past, in memorials, re-enactments, performances, gaming, graphic narratives, or films, also raise questions of historical epistemology. In troubling the notion of a sole author, in encouraging multimodality, re-creation and interactivity, affective histories invite us to think about who gets to be recognised as a historian and what forms of engagement with the past constitute history.

Professional historians, both in the past and the present, have often been sceptical or openly hostile about these affective dimensions to history and the practices associated with them. Although historians are increasingly interested in affective histories, this is less as a form of historical knowledge and more as a kind of emotional labour or psychological need. Public practices of war commemoration have, for example, been interpreted as meeting emotional needs of those widowed by war and life histories or reminiscing about the past have been promoted in terms of their psychological benefits for the elderly.<sup>19</sup> Discussing the emotion of historical practices as though they meet psychological needs serves, of course, to distance them from the work of professional historians whose work, being individual rather than collective, rational rather than emotional, rule bound rather than creative, appears to be a different kind of disciplined history. Yet, this disciplined history has its own story and one, we argue, that has always been concerned with regulating who counts as a historian and what counts as historical knowledge.

2.2 Disciplined history

New attitudes towards past-present relationships stimulated new pleasures and they also underpinned new forms of sociability that discovered, exchanged and distributed historical knowledge. However, what qualified as historical knowledge, which artefacts might be categorised as a source and how they might be interpreted quickly became matters for debate.<sup>20</sup> These debates were complex but were centrally concerned with an emerging distinction between the stories and objects of the past and a verifiable interpretation of historical events and processes based on agreed forms of evidence and interpretation. Even if their details varied in different places, these debates were a common feature of European societies by the mid-19th century and they would ultimately result in a distinctive form of historical practice that was disciplined in at least two ways.

Firstly, from the early 19th century onwards history became a distinctive subject with its own procedures and with a unique contribution to make to the human sciences. History as science, like all other sciences, had to be based on empirical evidence and on collections of historical sources that illuminated the lives of the past. These sources, in practice most were documents organised into themed collections, enabled the discovery of objective facts. The elaboration of methods for analysing these documents, understanding their meaning and their interconnection, then resulted in what was widely described as a ‘scientific history’. Following the work of German historian Leopold von Ranke, the aim of these ‘reconstructionist’ historians was an objective and truthful picture of how it actually was in the past and the final historical narrative was viewed as a direct representation of what happened in the past.<sup>21</sup> It is now widely recognised by historians that this particular demarcation of scientific method served to narrow down the time frameworks, subject matter, the sources and the possible interpretations of the past.<sup>22</sup>

The second way in which history became disciplined was that it became increasingly national. From the mid-18th century onwards, but especially after the French Revolution of 1789, nation-states increasingly sponsored the writing of history. The form of this sponsorship was variable and it reflected different histories and trajectories of state-formation. Yet there are common themes. The French Revolution, and the domestic turmoil and international conflicts associated with it in Europe and beyond, resulted in intensive efforts to recruit ordinary people to the cause of the nation. In their experience of military service, of new sites of memory – national archives, battlefields, graveyards, statues of national liberators and patriots – and the history curricula that were a characteristic feature of basic education, workers and peasants were presented with a history of the nation that sought to recruit peasants and workers to new forms of citizenship. Such histories served to identify and define peoples who, because of religious affiliation or attributed difference in language, culture, gender, race or ethnicity, either did not belong to particular nations and their associated empires or could not yet, or sometimes ever, assume the status of citizens.<sup>23</sup>

20 Beckett 2011.

21 Zelenak 2011: 525.

22 Iggers, Wang and Mukherjee 2008; Zelenak 2011: 525; Boldt 2014; Munslow 2015.

23 Fritzsche 2004; Berger and Lorenz 2010.

▼  
*National histories served to identify and define peoples who, because of religious affiliation or attributed difference in language, culture, gender, race or ethnicity, either did not belong to particular nations and their associated empires or could not yet, or sometimes ever, assume the status of citizens.*  
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National history quickly became the dominant genre of history writing in Europe, integral to national systems of education and commemorated in a wide variety of material and symbolic production; from public architecture to school history, from annual festivals and ceremonies to the supposedly private memories of subjects and families that are actually punctuated by national chronology, actors and events. A range of influential historical work has interpreted these projects in the production and commemoration of national history as primarily political projects, designed to secure the loyalty of ordinary people to the new kinds of nation states that emerged from the end of the 18th century.<sup>24</sup> These arguments are persuasive at a general level. The emergence of nation states certainly conditioned ideas about history, about the form and content of specific national stories, and the availability and use of these stories for understanding individual and group identities.

However, and to balance the general emphasis here on the power of the nation-state, to think of these ways of thinking and feeling *only* as impositions or interventions ignores the role of ordinary people in creating national cultures and histories. Indeed, the local historians and antiquaries examined in the preceding section were, in this view, key authors of national history. They classified and mapped and imagined the contours of the nation. Their discoveries, once private property, were transferred to museums and archives where their place in national history was secured. They were, in one influential formulation, the nation’s ‘little platoons’ whose emotions and enthusiasms drove historical research and education. They were the key authors of a conservative and liberal people’s history in which themes like folklore, tradition, homogeneity and continuity were prominent.<sup>25</sup>

24 Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1983.

25 Carter 2016.

7

*The most influential genres of activist history writing are those associated with the working class, with colonised peoples, women’s history, black and ethnic minority histories, histories of disability and histories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) histories.*

8

Moreover, even if other versions of history also flourished alongside the national narratives, those histories were also disciplined by the increasingly influential view of history as a science. 19th and 20th century Marxists may, for example, have wanted to resist the power of the nation and to develop transnational collective identities but their historical analyses of class routinely reproduced the rules of scientific history that nation states had so influentially sponsored. The scientific socialism inspired by the work of Marx and Engels, for example, identified laws of historical development and a resulting method for studying history, **historical materialism**, that has been an enduring influence on the politics and identity of the labour movement around the world. Economic and social processes took centre stage in these histories. In the British case, in labour colleges, trade unions and in the politically influential Workers Educational Association, adult learners took classes in social history but their historical research and education, including texts written by women, mainly comprised analyses of economics, politics and philosophy. This is a tradition of work informed by classical Marxism and aiming for objective knowledge and rational analysis to inform a process of political change.<sup>26</sup>

The disciplined histories that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, which were closely associated with the rise of nation states and empires, made claim to an Enlightenment ideal of universal knowledge. History was imagined as a scientific discipline, researched by professionals employed in universities, who used specialist (hermeneutic) techniques at official archive repositories and whose findings offered a series of lessons for today.<sup>27</sup> Its dominant form was the narrative manuscript, produced by individual authors who engage in a kind of adversarial competition for authority, influence, research funding and prestige. For the most part, these were narratives concerned with the powerful and the wealthy, and with nation states, formal politics and international relations. However, and while nation states remain an important actor in the production and consumption of history, the last half-century has been characterised by a democratisation of historical practices. As the next section, on activist histories, makes clear there are now a wider range of people and agencies involved in the production of historical knowledge and who utilise sources not previously used, a wide range of theoretical insights and new media to produce and distribute stories.

26  
Fieldhouse and Taylor 2013.

27  
Cook 2013.

2.3 Activist history

Despite the power of nation states and empires to organise and distribute national histories and memories, national history writing has never been hegemonic. There have always been competing versions of the past and other renditions of group identity. Activist histories sought to tell the past from the position of those silenced or marginalised by the triumphant and disciplined histories of nations. Although their content and style could vary widely, activist histories were more or less explicitly informed by concepts or frameworks associated with political movements.<sup>28</sup> They had in common the more or less explicit political and intellectual conviction that there are no pure facts and no objective histories. It followed that their histories, accounts of marginalised collectives and groups, were structured by, and proceeded from, economic, sociological, anthropological, linguistic or other categories designed to uncover patterns or tendencies in the past.<sup>29</sup> Moving in roughly chronological order, the most influential genres of activist history writing are those associated with the working class, with colonised peoples, women’s history, black and ethnic minority histories, histories of disability and histories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) histories.

A first generation of activist histories flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. They were associated with, and sometimes formed a part of, the diverse political and intellectual movement called the New Left that, in the United Kingdom, has become most closely associated with E.P. Thompson, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams.<sup>30</sup> Intellectually, the movement was united by its distinctive approach to recovering the voices of marginalised people and it was bound up with political changes, ranging from decolonisation, to revolution and the formation of welfare states, sweeping the world. History from below was championed by, and is now most closely associated with, these left-wing movements who sought radical political and social change. This ‘New Left’ was prominent in North and Latin America, in Europe and in the political project of the ‘Third World’. Although it had distinct regional characteristics, it was united by its internationalism, by its libertarianism and by a commitment to social revolution that was to be achieved through programmes of political and cultural education.<sup>31</sup> This education was advanced in philosophy clubs, discussion circles, lending libraries and other forms of adult learning. It was driven by the conviction that culture was a transformative force and, through it, ordinary people could understand themselves and the world in a better, and more critical, manner.

28  
Eley 2005.

29  
Munslow 2015.

30  
Dworkin 1997.

31  
See, for example, Gosse 2005; Christiansen and Scarlett 2013.



Perhaps the single most famous example of activist history, and arguably one of the most influential histories published in English during the 20th century, was E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Classes* (1963). Ostensibly a history of the working class in industrialising England from the 1780s to the early 1830s, its global influence has been explained not by its subject matter but by its explanatory repertoire, by its tone and its affinities to the versions of ‘people’s history’ emerging across the globe both at the same time and later.<sup>32</sup> A reaction to disciplined histories, and to their narratives of parliamentary progress or determining social structures, Thompson’s interest was in individual and collective agency and the manner in which this was mediated by historical experiences.<sup>33</sup> The explanatory role given to concepts of experience and agency became matters of sustained intellectual and political debate.<sup>34</sup> At the time of publication, however, there can be little doubt that it inspired an opening up of historical research to people, events, themes and topics that had either been ignored or relegated to the margins of historical practice.<sup>35</sup>

A whole range of areas began to be explored through forms of historical practice closely associated with the New Left. In the UK this is best exemplified by the birth of the History Workshop movement that was formally active from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. History Workshop sought to democratise historical research and knowledge. Its meetings brought together amateurs and professionals, intellectuals and workers who, often collaboratively, pursued new topics for research and developed new methodologies designed to recover the voices of ordinary people in history. Among the topics for the themed annual forums held between 1967 and 1994 were *Education and the Working Class* (1967), *Childhood in History: Children’s Liberation* (1972), *Women in History* (1973), *Workers Education and Class Consciousness* (1976), *Liberate, Co-operate, Celebrate* (1984) and *Class, Community and Conflict* (1989). These titles help to indicate a concern with marginalised and minority groups, an attempt to use history for developing empathy with the marginalised and using history as a resource for liberation. Yet this was not a smooth or consensual process. For, as the example of women’s history shows, who constituted ‘the people’, and how they should be researched, were matters of contention.

Since at least the 18th century, women had been active participants in the production of historical knowledge. Yet this activity was very rarely recognised and it made no impact on the writing of mainstream history or on the academic curriculum. Although they were not absent from disciplined histories, they had been allocated highly circumscribed roles in families, usually as mothers and carers, or in political movements, as educators, teachers or heroic campaigners.<sup>36</sup> The emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 1960s, often referred to as second wave feminism, sought to re-discover women’s active role in the past. Sheila Rowbotham’s *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (1972) and *Hidden From History* (1973) were foundational and inspirational texts. Written from an explicitly socialist and feminist perspective, they constituted a sustained critique of the implicitly masculine assumptions that governed the production of historical knowledge, including the people’s history inspired by E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Classes*. Rowbotham’s texts were only the most tangible outcome of a process through which activist historians, including

<sup>32</sup> Winant et al. 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Davis and Morgan 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Middleton 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Eley 2005: 48–60; Davis and Morgan 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Smith 1998.

Doing the history of women, children and other minority groups also entailed reading documents differently and accepting new definitions of what constituted historical evidence and methods of interpreting it.

<sup>37</sup> See Moore in this series.

<sup>38</sup> Sisterhood and After 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Bruley 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel, 1990; Gentry, 2013.

Sally Alexander, Anna Davin and Catherine Hall, began to question the terms and categories with which history was written. In focusing on nations and classes disciplined historians had, they argued, ignored whole areas of the world, groups of people and historical processes. As historians and activists began to research the history and experiences of women, children, immigrant and minority groups both in Britain and across the British Empire, they began to also question the basic assumptions and procedures that governed the production of historical knowledge. For doing the history of women, children and other minority groups also entailed, they argued, reading documents differently (‘reading against the grain’) and accepting new definitions of what constituted historical evidence and methods of interpreting it. Democratising historical knowledge meant recognising a plurality of historical experiences and forms of knowing.<sup>37</sup>

One example of these plural ways of knowing was the emergence of ‘consciousness-raising’ (C-R) a form of both historical research and education in the Women’s Liberation Movement. Beginning with the process of women forming small groups to talk through their biographical experiences, to contextualise them in some way and out of this dialogue to develop a feminist orientation, consciousness raising was criticised both by ‘scientific socialists’ and those women, especially black women, who viewed it as too individualised and too removed from urgent struggles around class and race.<sup>38</sup> Yet, C-R offered a space in which new forms of personalised and biographical historical knowledge were recognised and legitimated.<sup>39</sup> It can be seen, therefore, as part of an important moment in which the elision of the term evidence with documents (held in static historical archives) began to be questioned. Instead, C-R both drew on and encouraged the idea that people were historical sources and archiving was a process rather than a place.

Notwithstanding debates around who constituted the people and how they should be studied, the History Workshop Movement shared a commitment to democratic education. Although this was never a clearly formulated pedagogical position or theory it did encompass recovering experience, promoting empathy and developing historical understanding through reflection, dialogue, discussion and performance. History Workshop was an important part of the emergence of the so-called ‘New History’ promoted by the Schools Council, which studied history in depth and championed a skills-based approach in which students were encouraged to read and interpret original documents and materials. It was more concerned with the mundane and the everyday than with high politics or diplomacy. It signalled a movement away from the rote learning of facts towards the process of interpretation and, from there, to a more or less explicit concern with **subjectivity** – with the processes through which historical actors developed particular feelings, beliefs or desires. Influences on these pedagogical practices were sometimes implicit and they were also varied, including work in the tradition of progressive education, of American pragmatism (especially John Dewey) but also anti-colonial and revolutionary educators, especially Paolo Friere and Franz Fanon.<sup>40</sup>

This activist version of ‘history from below’ turned out to be extraordinarily influential in the decades that followed the 1960s. It informed a wide range of arts, heritage, cultural and educational practices. This was partly because its constituencies of support in the working class, especially among women and amongst migrants and their descendants, got jobs and developed careers in schools and universities, in museums and libraries and in the arts and heritage sectors. It fuelled a publishing boom as the ‘voice of the people’ was articulated in books, pamphlets and tracts and sold in the proliferating radical bookshops of the period. The people could be heard, as well as read, in the music and theatre that supported the revival of folk music, in the genres of punk, reggae and rock open to migrant heritage artists, and on the radio and television through community programming.<sup>41</sup> This diffuse influence developed despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that it was less a single, coherent movement and more a populist and egalitarian impulse determined to recognise and include ‘the people’. But who constituted the people and how they might be included in history remain matters of sustained practical and theoretical debate.

Eric Hobsbawm once observed that ‘the people’ was a badge, rather than a technical term, and that it indicated ‘an option for subjects or citizens against governments, for the common man and woman against elite minorities, or for whatever section of the common man is supposed to stand for the committed populist’s values and aspirations’.<sup>42</sup> This serves as an important reminder that activist histories were, and are, also produced by groups with no declared political allegiance as well as those having more or less formal affiliation to the political right. These are activist histories because they were motivated partly by a desire to either complete, correct or overturn a perceived neglect of history and of ‘the people’, by an elite section of society. Arguably, the outstanding example has been the sustained campaigning over more than three decades around the history curriculum in schools. For, if the History Workshop Movement was an advocate for skills based, interpretative histories, there have been no less powerful voices for a traditional curriculum of facts, designed to teacher a decidedly British history and identity. An alternative example of debates around people’s history concerns the claim, very common over the last decade, that the history of the ‘white working class’ has been marginalised and forgotten. Although detailed historical arguments of this kind may still be relatively rare, it has entered mainstream historical writing and, more importantly, it is a major theme of media representation and reporting.<sup>43</sup> It appears in newspaper editorialising, opinion pieces, blogs and documentaries so that, despite the absence of detailed argument, it becomes an established perspective for interpreting both historical and contemporary events.<sup>44</sup>

**41**  
See, for example, Ward, 2018; Samra and Fingers, 2014; Unfinished Histories, 2018; Long, Baig-Clifford and Shannon 2013.

**42**  
Hobsbawm 1981: 9.

**43**  
For examples of these historical arguments see Dench and Gavron, 2006 and Collins, 2014. For mainstream example see Todd 2014a.

**44**  
See, for example, Henderson 2012; Historians for Britain 2017.

2.4 The legacies of history

The three ‘types’ of history identified here are, it should be emphasised, simply for explanatory purposes. In constructing these types we are seeking to identify the typical and characteristic features of different genres of producing history from below. *Table 1* offers a schematic summary of these features moving through:

- Who does the historical research? – amateurs, professionals or a mixture of these?
- What is the typical scale of the research? – individuals or informal groups in a specific and local setting (micro); formal groups and organisations at workplace, branch, workplace, village, town level (meso); media, law and government at nation-state level and beyond (macro).
- Who are the central actors, and who are the main agents, in the histories?
- What key concepts are employed? How do they structure the histories produced?

**Table 1**  
*Three types of history from below*

	Affective	Disciplined	Activist
Researchers	Amateur	Professional	Hybrid
Scale	Micro	Macro	Meso
Central Actors	Individuals  Families	Nations  Classes	Groups
Key concepts	Family  Community  Values	Scientific history  Nationalism  Class	Class, gender, race  Inequality

It will be immediately clear that this typology is open to debate and that all of the distinctive characteristics overlap to a significant degree. Our purpose here is not to insist on boundaries but simply to identify the diversity of history from below traditions and their relationship to the ‘scientific study of the past’. What are their legacies for today?

There can be little doubt that all three areas have both contributed to, and been conditioned by, the democratisation of history. Although we have indicated that this process has long historical roots, there can be little doubt that its speed and dimensions have radically changed over the past two decades. Indeed, it might be argued that we are now in an era where a version of history from below, and perhaps one that bears close resemblance to the affective histories outlined above, dominates processes of historical production. A series of political, technological and educational changes have encouraged the explosion of popular histories that allow individuals, groups and corporations to engage in all phases of historical production, from the making of sources, to the assembling of archives and the creation of narratives.<sup>45</sup>

These changes have, at least in some respects, occurred at the expense of both disciplinary and activist histories. The notion of history as universal science has been fatally compromised by its association with nationalism and empire and its promotion of colonial and patriarchal rule. If History (with a capital H) no longer reveals universal truths about the past, the states which sponsored its rise have also fundamentally changed. The hollowing out of nation states saw central and local governments lose functions to other agencies. It is perhaps symbolic that, in the United Kingdom, the foundation of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in 1994 coincided with the last annual History Workshop meeting. The social and political energies that had given rise to History Workshop appeared to have dissipated and, instead of organised groups of historical researchers whose solidarities were around the politics of class, gender and race, a more disparate but no less energetic set of groups came to the fore. In the two decades that followed, the HLF would enrol more than a quarter of million volunteers in a diverse set of heritage projects and it would distribute millions of pounds designed to promote the democratisation of history. It did so on the explicit understanding that history was an important element in both individual and collective well-being with the potential to promote social inclusion.<sup>46</sup>

If history from below has become increasingly important, and if history is now produced and consumed in increasingly affective terms and emotional terms, this may be both a time of opportunity and challenge. There is a tangible enthusiasm for the past that underpins the development of **public history** as heritage, education and entertainment.<sup>47</sup> The next section considers the forms of collaborative research that can help to turn this enthusiasm into historical stories that are circulated around society, what Lloyd and Moore call ‘sedimented histories’, ‘where voices and memories are contested or perspectives fragmented, where elements of the past are differently weighted or valued, we are aiming to create a sediment of connected, but not necessarily uniform histories’.<sup>48</sup> These histories are likely to represent a diversity of interests and priorities but, like the types of history traced here, they should not be seen as in competition but adjacent to one another.

**45**  
Kean and Martin, 2013.

**46**  
Littler and Naidoo 2005.

**47**  
For a helpful introduction to the field of public history see Kean and Martin 2013.

**48**  
Lloyd and Moore 2015: 242.

### 3. KEY DIMENSIONS OF HISTORY FROM BELOW AS A RESEARCH ACTIVITY

This section draws out a set of epistemological principles from the brief review of the different traditions of research examined in Section 2. Although these traditions can appear quite different, all of them, even if sometimes only implicitly, accept that knowledge of the past is plural, that it is contested, that it is located and specific and that there are multiple ways of participating in, and contributing to, the production of historical knowledge.

#### 3.1 Politics and epistemology

The histories from below examined in Section 2 all enabled ordinary people to become historical researchers. Affective, disciplined and activist histories have had the effect of demystifying the process of historical research, making it more accessible for those not formally trained as historians and, instead of regarding them as educationally under privileged or historically ignorant, to engage them in the formulation, production, distribution and consumption of history. In different ways, these traditions democratised historical production because they were at least sympathetic to the claim that the production of histories is also inherently a political act. What counts as history – from definitions of sources and evidence, to the periods, actors and themes who are simultaneously included and excluded – frame popular people’s beliefs and assumptions about the way the world works and the identities of groups in it. Historical practices are, therefore, one part of the cultural processes through which mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion work in contemporary societies.<sup>49</sup>

Democratising historical knowledge entails being sympathetic towards a weak form of **constructivist epistemology** and the claim that there is an ‘overlap between the historical process and narratives about that process’.<sup>50</sup> This entails accepting that, while there may be a distinction between what actually happened in the past and what individuals, groups and societies think and say about that past, that distinction is blurred. The popular aphorism that ‘history is written by the victors’ captures a popular sense that the production of historical narratives is bound up with power. Historians from below, therefore, need to think carefully about, and intervene in, both the mechanisms and moments of historical production.<sup>51</sup>

**49**  
See, for example, Bourdieu 1986; Popular Memory Group 1982.

**50**  
Trouillot 1995: 6.

**51**  
Trouillot 1995.



Researching history from below begins, in other words, from the recognition that there are a plurality of historical experiences and forms of knowing. Practitioners of history from below are critical of dominant modes of historical knowledge that emphasise abstract facts, objective interpretation and formal study. Instead, they want a more inclusive approach to the past, one that listens to and respects marginal voices and uses those voices to deepen understanding of historical events and processes.

3.2 Practices

This section attempts to turn the general characteristics of history from below into a more practical description of the decisions to be taken and issues addressed in designing a historical project. It is intentionally normative and specifies approaches to doing history that are likely to make a contribution to democratising historical knowledge production. Here we draw, in particular, on the lessons learned from activist history, on the insights produced into the motivations, practices and interests of ‘affective history’ from contemporary study. We also draw on a recognition of the exclusions generated by the disciplining of history in the 18th century. From these three sources, we delineate a set of practices that might be adequate to the name ‘history from below’.

Instigators

Democratising historical research requires developing an infrastructure where marginalised individuals and groups can be empowered to participate in the production of historical knowledge. Instigators need to take practical steps to make this happen. Instigators might be historical enthusiasts or professional historians, or they may work as administrators, researchers or educators in a range of cultural, therapeutic and educational institutions. They might be, to take some concrete examples, genealogists and family historians; volunteers in or representatives of community groups; funding officers working for funding bodies like the Heritage Lottery Fund; grant holding bodies; online communities of shared interest and expertise; academics, curators, consultants and archivists for whom co-production and partnership working are central to their practices.

Yet, more important than their status and role is their understanding and championing of co-production in historical research. This means going beyond notions of outreach and dissemination and developing an ethics and practice of partnership that reflexively seeks to move away from academic led history production. Instigators should not see themselves as owning research or leading it, but rather as practicing in an ethical framework that is committed both to the multiple truths of the past and to the people seeking to tell their stories and make their histories. The vision needs to be one of shared historical authority, of dialogue and debate; the aim new understandings of our shared pasts.

Democratising historical research requires developing an infrastructure where marginalised individuals and groups can be empowered to participate in the production of historical knowledge.

52  
Pente et al. 2015: 45; Lloyd and Moore 2015: 238; Ward and Pente 2017.

53  
Lloyd and Moore 2015: 238.

54  
See, for example, Scott 1990.

Participants

Typically, instigators will either be working with pre-existing community groups or helping to build research teams from a wider community. In either case, both instigators and groups will want to consider ethical, methodological and practical issues relating to who participates, how they do so and how they will be facilitated to engage with the making of history. These efforts will start with the recognition that the democratisation of history requires real attempts to engage new participants and new voices in the making of history. This will mean providing safe spaces where people can meet (face-to-face or virtually), where doubts can be expressed and fears acknowledged. Spaces will need to be appropriately configured to encourage and build confidence in people to engage with the process of making history. Careful consideration is therefore required about the appropriate format of these spaces: who is invited into them; who is suitable to facilitate these discussions and on what grounds?

The particular formulation of groups and partnerships will change over time and between different kinds of project. Yet doing historical research from below requires attention to, and reflection on, the motivations and interests of participants and building spaces of dialogue that help develop and maintain the relationships that underpin research as a co-operative and collaborative endeavour. There is, as Pente and Ward have argued, ‘no ideal type of co-production’ and Lloyd and Moore have written of the ‘exhilaration, passions and frustrations’ that research generates.<sup>52</sup> Co-produced historical research makes time and space for processing these emotions, tries to build relationships capable of working through them and, as more people become history makers, explores questions about ‘who owns the past and how it is used’.<sup>53</sup>

Sources

The identification, construction and use of sources are key moments in the process of historical production. In the positivist paradigm the term sources has very often been interpreted to mean written documents whose status as offering verifiable facts is guaranteed by their selection for preservation in official archives.<sup>54</sup> Historians from below have long been aware that these official sources, the records of powerful people, of state administration and international relations held in government funded spaces, offer only a partial view of the past. This is why activist historians tried to develop a technique – ‘reading against the grain’ – that encouraged researchers to use sources in ways not intended by their authors and in a manner designed to identify the silences and absences in official archives. It is also why work in the history from below tradition is closely associated with the successful attempts to widen definitions of historical sources.

The practices of oral history, the recording of life histories, the writing of autobiographies, public testimonies, performances of song and dance, and visual sources of all kinds offer salient examples of how historians from below have already attempted to produce new histories by identifying and creating new sources. These attempts have often been related to technological innovations that facilitate access to existing sources and the creation of new ones. Oral history, for example, was made possible and popular by the invention of portable cassette recorders and, just as importantly, it facilitated a more dialogical approach to the past in which the subjects of the research became narrators of their stories and shared authority for the production of historical knowledge. Digital history, and specifically the use of the web as a research tool that not only facilitates easier access to old and new sources but enables new forms of collaborative interpretation, is regularly claimed to have radical potential. If these claims are sometimes exaggerated it certainly is the case that digitisation of records has greatly expanded the range and depth of sources that can now be used as historical evidence.<sup>55</sup> Traditional documentary sources, court records, house budgets and migration records for example, once too unwieldy and too time consuming to be used effectively, have been used to write histories from below. In these cases, the digitisation of sources has not only increased the number of people who can research the past and become involved in its interpretation, it has also enabled the recruitment of citizen historians who, to take one pertinent example, contribute to the interpretation of First World War diaries.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the web, that specific part of the internet using www-protocols, is now, of course, a historical source in its own right offering, according to some scholars at least, the potential for researching, producing and consuming histories in new ways.<sup>57</sup>

Extending the definition of the term sources, and engaging with an eclectic range of documents, images, objects, buildings and spaces, can enable the production of different histories. The term source should be used flexibly and imaginatively and historians’ traditional preoccupation with written documents set aside in favour of any tangible and intangible artefacts that tell us something about the past. Historians from below should, in other words, embrace multiple ways of creating historical evidence.

Archiving

Sources become archives through acts of agency. It is people who put sources together and organise them into orders, collections, and sometimes into specific buildings, concerned with specific events, themes, processes or identities. Defined in this way, archiving is both a very broad process – it organises knowledge in physical libraries and depositories but also on tourist walks, in databases and on websites – and a crucial moment of historical production. It prepares ‘facts for historical intelligibility’.<sup>58</sup>

The foundation of community archives over the past three decades thus represents a significant change in the possibilities for producing new kinds of histories. ‘Community archive’ is a rather loose term but it refers to both heritage focussed endeavours and those more politically motivated activist archives.<sup>59</sup> They thus come out of both the affective and activist traditions of history from below. What they have in common is a relatively open understanding of what sources might constitute an

55  
Bonacchi 2018; Adair, Filene and Koloski 2018; Weller 2013.

56  
Pente et al. 2015: 35.

57  
Brügger 2012.

58  
Trouillot 1995: 52.

59  
Flinn 2012.

archive. Ephemera, objects, works of art, performance, autobiography and oral testimony tend to be key parts of their collections and integral to the histories they share. In their use of blogs, apps and social media campaigns community groups are also engaged in the process of building an online archive that can facilitate the production of the histories that were previously marginalised or subordinated. These collections are not inert data or historical facts but central to modes of representational belonging for people who regard themselves as marginalised by mainstream history, media and other institutions.<sup>60</sup> Yet, and for the UK until recently, community archiving has remained an uneven and erratic process, driven by specific individuals and groups, rather than part of a wider sea change in historical and archival practices.

Participatory historical research has the potential to extend and deepen these attempts to assemble diverse and marginalised historical sources into collections. It does so, for example, by employing technologies which support the digitisation and description of sources and provide platforms for their hosting. Digital archives employing the Web 2.0 participatory template of collaborative working have allowed individuals and community groups to upload their own sources to an archive and to discuss and debate materials submitted by other users. Participatory archiving, where citizen historians contribute knowledge or resources to a usually online environment, has the potential to develop new sources, remixing existing archival material in new contexts and creates the possibilities for greater diversity in the production of historical knowledge. As Flinn notes, these approaches offer the potential for a collaborative ‘We Think’ approach, rather than the individual ‘I Think’ approach, in the production of history.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, in order to turn that potential into tangible and systematic changes in archiving practices and historical interpretation there are significant barriers to overcome. Access to those sources attributed the status of historical evidence has always been restricted by the formal rules of closure and access devised and implemented by nation states. Informal codes, of status, education and conduct, have also facilitated for some, and constrained for others, the use of traditional documentary sources in physical archives. It may be that changes to archival practice are beginning to disrupt some of these patterns of exclusion. Digitisation circumvents the need for long and expensive trips to particular sites and has allowed for a level of specificity (or granularity) in searching that has the potential to facilitate the production of previously hidden histories. However, significant barriers remain. Access to archived sources, whether physical or digital, is still largely dependent on speaking a ‘first-world’ language and being able to access and use computers with stable Internet access. Decisions about preservation, cataloguing, tagging and interpretation still routinely rest on traditional, and more elitist, definitions of sources and evidence that undermine histories from below.

Histories from below are facilitated when archivists, curators and researchers see archiving not simply as a technical process involving specialist skills and knowledge but a shared and participatory process. That process will involve learning from established traditions of community archiving, broadening definitions of sources and evidence and seeking ‘expanded, vibrant, useable and contextualised records for memory and identity’.<sup>62</sup> It will require, in short, developing archiving practices from below.

60  
Caswell et al. 2012.

61  
Flinn 2013: 31. Also see Bonacchi in this series for examples of online archiving and co-production.

62  
Cook 2013: 115.

Narratives

Narrators select or create sources and organise them into historical narratives. These sources, and the archives that make them accessible, condition both the form and content of historical narratives. Disciplinary histories are routinely organised around the master categories of the nation and its territories reflecting, of course, the domination of state archives over processes of historical production. Having new sources to use, and new archives to consult, potentially opens up narrative frameworks and facilitates both new forms and new content for history from below.

Typically, historical frameworks involve things like the central actors of history; the identification of antagonists, obstacles and other difficulties; the dating or periodisation of events and significant points in any story; the time economy in the story that identifies, for example, golden ages or dark periods, or moments of trauma or absence. When historical research is co-produced these building blocks of the story, the actors and the periods, and the concepts used to tell it potentially become an object of discussion and debate. The framing of the story is no longer a matter of common sense or implied knowledge but a process open to dialogue and to debate. Such dialogue should be based on the recognition that the production and performance of histories is, in part, a creative act. The selection of material and its organisation into intelligible stories will inevitably be conditioned by an endpoint that requires explanation.

Nonetheless, how these stories are narrated and their resulting status as histories have been the subject of sustained philosophical and theoretical debate. Much of this debate has been decidedly esoteric and, for historians from below, it may be more helpful to emphasise an ethics of narration. Narrative form, the naming of actors and periods and concepts, should be the outcome of a dialogue based on an ethics of respect. These ethics rest, in turn, on the assumption of human agency, on the human potential for moral action and, importantly, the capacity to change one’s own views by adopting the perspectives of others. For historians from below, decisions about narrative forms are not conditioned by pre-existing assumptions about how the world works. Instead, the priority for any form of historical story telling is its ability to reconstruct a multitude of historical voices and create empathy for them. Empathy, of course, neither condones nor condemns historical actors, nor is empathy a synonym for sympathy. Historical empathy is an interpretative tool, a way of thinking clearly with the past, and provides an opportunity for inclusive and progressive histories.<sup>63</sup>

63  
Hitchcock 2015; Eley, 2005: 56–8.

Making co-produced histories

Co-produced narratives are, like all other historical narratives, assigned significance once they are produced. Not every narrative becomes a part of the standard and widely accepted historical narrative understood simply as ‘the past’. Indeed, only very small selections of historical stories become part of dominant historical narratives and this raises at least two important points for all those involved in co-produced histories to consider.

The first is around legacies. Co-produced histories may start out as intimate, local or group stories. As affective and activist histories, they often tell stories of everyday life or narrate the histories of groups. If these histories aim to have an impact beyond their participants, and that is an issue open to dialogue and reflection from the outset, then co-produced histories need to give both thought and action to making impact and sustaining the legacies of projects. There is, we would argue, a particularly rich tradition in activist histories of using both the processes and the products of historical research for developing individual and group identities, for creating new solidarities and for changing the way we think about the past and its uses today. Not all of these legacies will be relevant for every co-produced history, but it is helpful to think about desired legacies at the outset of projects and to regularly review and refine them in the process of research. Facer and Enright’s categorisation of potential legacies – products, people, networks, concepts, institutions and the research landscape – is an important tool for this purpose.<sup>64</sup> Some further practical examples are highlighted in the case studies below.

The second is around the potential of connecting co-produced histories, which are often intimate, local or group stories, to wider historical narratives. The diverse practices of history from below, and the democratisation of historical production more broadly, has resulted in increasing the number and range of narratives about the past. However, and while not ignoring the fact that some people and groups still struggle to tell their stories and make their voices heard, there is a danger that histories from below become increasingly specialist, compartmentalised and group specific. These may serve important purposes but leave in place the historical narratives and structures of exclusion that made them necessary in the first place. When histories become segregated their potential for empathy diminishes, so co-produced histories should consider the problem of ‘horizontal inequalities’ and whether, and how, projects avoid the segmentation of historical narratives.<sup>65</sup>

64  
Facer and Enright 2016: 121–140.

65  
Pinto and Taithe 2015: 8.

▼  
*To have an impact beyond their participants, co-produced histories need to give both thought and action to making impact and sustaining the legacies of projects.*  
▲



4. CASE STUDIES

4.1 Feminist histories in the city of Birmingham.

When Catherine Hall, later to become one of the most influential historians of Britain and empire, arrived to study History at the University of Birmingham in the late 1960s the ‘syllabus, true to traditions of English empiricism, had no place for a discussion of historiography; there was no theory, no methods, only facts and objective historians’. Hall joined the widespread student protests of 1968 which were, at least in part, formulated against the elitist intellectual traditions of universities. A student occupation of the University demanded ‘changes in syllabuses, including a new approach to history teaching, one that would encourage students to think critically about who was writing, in what context and for what audience. This upheaval was driven by students who wanted, among other things, a different kind of education’.<sup>66</sup>

66  
Hall 2017.

▼  
**Feminist History Groups brought together women researching historical questions and provided a space not simply for sharing findings but also problems. Those problems included not just questions of sources, concepts and interpretation but also of unsympathetic and ill-informed responses from both those within and outside academia.**  
▲



Figure 1  
Feminist archive material from the Cadbury Research Library.

67  
Davlin 1980: 192.

68  
Birmingham Women’s History Group 2015.

Hall also decided she wanted to do a different kind of research. Inspired by the History Workshop movement, but critical of the absence of women and any critical account of the sexual division of labour, she embarked as a mother on a ‘new kind of life, new kind of politics and new kind of history writing’. Her research into women’s/feminist history drew strength and flourished partly because of the explicit attempt to develop supportive spaces for discussion, dialogue and debate. Feminist History Groups, like the one established in London in 1973, brought together women researching historical questions and provided a space not simply for sharing findings but also problems. Those problems included not just questions of sources, concepts and interpretation but also of unsympathetic and ill-informed responses from both those within and outside academia. It was for this reason that the groups were frequently open to women only. The London Group took its decision to omit men uncertainly, regularly reviewed it and pragmatically implemented it.<sup>67</sup>

The Feminist History Group that Hall helped to found in Birmingham helped to cultivate the ground-breaking analysis of gender and class that would be published in the book *Family Fortunes*. Hall’s own reflections see it as a product of a particular conjuncture in which concepts of gender and class worked within, and helped expand, the already established landmark events of the 19th century. Her interest in race ideas would follow later. However, and perhaps just as importantly, it also helped to produce the research that led to the Feminist Reviews’ sponsored walk on the theme *Birmingham Women: Past and Present*. Although this particular feminist history group appears not to have met beyond the 1980s, the walk has been updated by a new Birmingham Women’s History group, established in 2015 and providing training and support in archival research, oral history interviewing and community film making, so that the stories of Birmingham women are not forgotten (*Figures 2 and 3*).<sup>68</sup>





© Women's History Birmingham

**Figure 2**  
A walk led by Women's History Birmingham inspired by the Feminist Review sponsored walk in the 1980s.



© Women's History Birmingham

**Figure 3**  
Home screen of the Women's History Birmingham website.



4.2 All Together Now?

Disability History Scotland (DHS) is a disabled people’s organisation established in 2012 that advocates the advancement of equality and diversity through the promotion of disability history, education and campaigning. Its mission statement says that:

We work collaboratively in an attempt to share knowledge and power, as well as to recognize that we cannot speak for others so should never assume that we have any answers other than what we ourselves know and what we hear directly from other disabled people. We use art and different artistic media as a way to engage people, drama, song, animation, have all been used effectively. Our talks or public meetings are normally accompanied by some stunning images that allow people to see disability in different ways.<sup>69</sup>

The *All Together Now?* project sought to investigate the impact of World War One on the lives of disabled people. Taking a landmark event in national history, DHS worked to explore how the new visibility of disabled people, especially war veterans, may have helped to change attitudes not just to disability but also to understandings of mental health and to critical perspectives around concepts of charity and justice.

The project produced a short, animated film entitled *One Last Push* which narrated a short history of disability in Scotland and which encouraged viewers towards critical perspectives on reflexivity and disability. An associated Memory Chest toured schools, museums and community organisations. In it physical artefacts, including war medals, prosthetic limbs and transcripts from interviews, allowed an insight into the agency of disabled people and the emergence of the disability movement (Figure 4).

69  
Disability History Scotland, About Us, <http://www.disabilityhistoryscotland.co.uk/about/> (accessed June 2018).

▼

**Taking a landmark event in national history, DHS worked to explore how the new visibility of disabled people, especially war veterans, may have helped to change attitudes not just to disability but also to understandings of mental health and to critical perspectives around concepts of charity and justice.**

▲



Figure 4  
A Memory Chest that used physical artefacts to provide insight into the disability movement.



4.3 Great War to Race Riots

Writing on the Wall (WoW), an arts, literary and cultural organisation based in Liverpool, was presented with a bundle of historical documents by local historian and activist Joe Farrag. Those documents covered the period 1919-1921 and concerned the position of black ex-servicemen, seamen and factory workers stranded or left destitute in Liverpool after the First World War. With the aid of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, WoW used these documents as the basis of a creative heritage project. The project recruited volunteers and equipped them with the skills to identify and map the population and the geography of the servicemen, seamen and factory workers. These citizen historians then read, contextualised and interpreted the letters and testimonies of black people who, regularly the subject of popular and official racism, were targeted in a major riot in 1919 that resulted in the death of Charles Wootton. The project preserved the sources, catalogued and digitised them so that they are available to view on the Internet and to other researchers interested in Liverpool’s black history (Figure 5).<sup>70</sup>

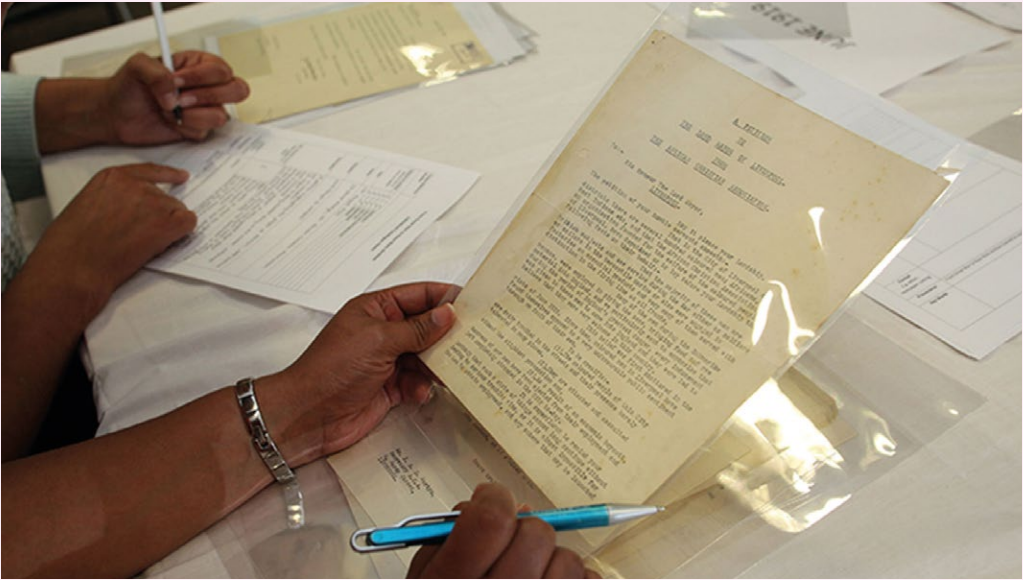
As well as engaging new people in using historical sources and archiving them, the project engaged them in constructing new narratives about the past. One stated aim here was to identify, recognise and discuss the legacies of the racism that so catastrophically affected the lives of ex-servicemen, seamen and factory workers but, at the same time, to avoid reducing the role of black people in history to that of passive victims of violence. The project uncovered important evidence about both the everyday experiences of black people in the city and the agency of those people in fighting racism when they encountered it. What that evidence meant, for individuals, the city of Liverpool and for the writing of national history, was the question that the project gave much consideration to. Poetry and creative writing classes re-interpreted the events and invited participants to write about their legacies for today. Janaya Pickett (2015), in a memorable poem entitled *Validation*, felt:

Protected at great length  
By the light and lives  
That we now speak of in the past tense.  
Unbreakable codes,  
Unquestionable Strength.

As well as these personal and affective responses the project ensured that the race riots were inscribed into contemporary accounts of both the history of Liverpool and the history of Britain. Walking tours of the city, for example, retold the events of 6 June 1919 and remembered the night when Charles Wootton was murdered. The project erected a plaque to commemorate the life and the racist murder of Wootton and, in doing so, inscribed that event into the history of the city (Figure 6). Finally, the project engaged creatively and critically with the wider centennial commemorations of the First World War. It held a series of public workshops in which black poppies were hand-made to commemorate those men whose lives, as servicemen, sailors and workers, were intimately affected by the First World War, and to challenge national histories to critically consider how these events and these actors affect national narratives of the past.<sup>71</sup>

70  
Great War to Race Riots 2015.  
  
71  
Heneghan and Onoura 2017.

Figure 5  
Writing on the Wall volunteers engaging with historical documents.



© Writing on the Wall



Figure 6  
Unveiling of a plaque dedicated to Charles Wootton in Liverpool.

4.4 What do these case studies tell us?

History from below is not a single clearly defined historical method, school of practice or interpretation. These case studies come from different places, address different themes and are organised in different ways. However, they also demonstrate that history from below is motivated by a set of related issues that arise when history becomes a collaborative endeavour. These are some of the key issues and questions that collaborative historical projects will need to consider:

1. Historical silences

- Which histories are marginalised in contemporary society? Which people, places, periods or events are hidden?
- Why are they hidden? Which structures, discourses or genres of reporting prevent us from hearing or understanding?
- Why are they important?

2. Communities of research and interpretation

- What kinds of communities of research and interpretation would be ethical and capable of investigating particular historical silences?
- Whose voices should be involved in the design and production of research?
- What knowledge, skills and values are appropriate for particular topics or projects?
- Are there reasons for restricting access to particular individuals or groups?
- What is being demanded of people who participate?

3. Sources and interpretation

- What counts as historical sources for your project?
- Can new technologies and social media enhance the identification, collection, archiving of new historical evidence?
- How can this evidence be curated and interpreted in collaborative ways?
- What interpretative tools can you draw on? What ideas are important? Are they clear and accessible?
- How can you archive your sources and make them available to others?

4. Learning and communication

- What are the most appropriate forms of narration and representation? What audiences do you want to reach?
- In what ways can new technologies and social media enhance the learning and communication that follows from your project?
- Are there dangers of historical segmentation?
- How can we connect new narratives of the past that emerge from collaborative projects?

5. INTO THE FUTURE

History from below may be a diverse tradition but it is informed by the fundamental belief that history is, or ought to be, a collaborative enterprise. This is partly because the range, depth and sophistication of historical knowledge can be enhanced by the participation of everyday people and ordinary communities. It is also partly because when the production of historical knowledge is democratised the boundaries of historical enquiry broaden. New topics and sources emerge. New debates and disputes, about archiving and interpretation, modes of representation and about the power of the past, develop.

These debates have always been important, but at a time when images of the past, and claims to it, seem to circulate with increasing rapidity and urgency, a vibrant and open historical culture seems more important than ever. History produced collaboratively and democratically necessarily engages with a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives. It is open to different experiences. It involves learning that history is not a list of facts or events but a highly contingent form of knowledge always open to contestation and to change. Producing the past, rather than simply consuming it, necessarily engages researchers with questions about the self and subjectivity, and with notions of community and identity. It helps us to realise that humans are partly constituted by the ways in which they remember and understand the past. Futures, it is worth remembering, can be radically transformed by collaboratively reworking the past.

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# GLOSSARY

**Archive(s)**

- a) The collection of historical sources preserved for future use.
- b) Institutions that collect, organise, care and make available historical facts and sources.
- c) A physical or digital memory space.

**Antiquary**

A person who collects or buys and sells old and valuable objects.

**Epistemology (historical)**

Theory of historical knowledge.

**Constructivist epistemology**

Theory of historical knowledge that emphasises its construction by people in the present.

**Positivist epistemology**

Theory of historical knowledge that emphasises the facts of the past and the independence of these facts from socio-historical processes.

**Experience**

'...the actions, practices, habits, values, beliefs, mentalities, and feelings' of the oppressed, excluded, pauperized, and marginalized: those who have traditionally been excluded from historical accounts and remained 'largely anonymous in history – the 'nameless' multitudes in their workaday trials and tribulations' (Lüdtke 1995: 4).

**History**

- a) What happened in the past (the facts of history).
- b) What is said to have happened in the past (our knowledge of that past).

**Historical materialism**

A methodological approach to history, associated with the ideas of Karl Marx and which understood social change and development in terms of a number of 'laws'. Central to this approach is the claim that economic systems determine, or condition, ideas, thinking and culture.

**Historian**

A person involved with researching, producing, commemorating or enacting of a segment of the past.

**History from below**

An ensemble of activities and practices in which ideas of history are embedded or a dialectic of past-present relations is rehearsed (Samuel 1994: 8).

**Ideological**

The claim that the practice and the production of history always serves particular ends. History is not a neutral or objective description of the facts of the past but always part of a political process in which past, present and future are managed.

**Methods/methodological**

The principles, techniques and guidelines that historians use to research the past.

**Public history**

A field of practice that starts from the premise that the past is a shared human experience and so one open for reflection and dialogue based on a wide range sources and modes of communication (Ashton and Kean 2009).

**Perspectives**

A distinctive and particular way of conceptualising and understanding the past.

**Preservation**

The attempt to preserve, conserve and protect buildings, objects, landscapes or other artefacts attributed historical significance.

**Sources**

Tangible and intangible artefacts that tell us something about the past. Written documents may be the most common form of historical evidence but buildings, posters or an item of clothing are also sources. This is because they have the potential to illuminate some aspect of the past.

**Subjectivity**

The feelings, beliefs or desires experienced by individuals and groups and central to their identity.

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## About the Connected Communities programme:

The Connected Communities programme (2010-2020) is a research programme led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which brings together over 300 hundred projects across arts, humanities and social sciences. It aims to help understand the changing nature of communities in their historical and cultural contexts, and the role of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life. The programme addresses a range of themes including: health and wellbeing; creative and digital communities; civil society and social innovation; environment and sustainability; heritage; diversity and dissent; and participatory arts. Further information and resources are available at: <https://connected-communities.org>



